DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 035 650 TE 001 702

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TITLE Dramatic Improvisation as English Teaching Methodology.
INSTITUTION New York State English Council, Oswego.
PUB DATE Oct 69
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT The English Record; v20 n1 p46-51 Oct 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
DESCRIPTORS Acting, Characterization (Literature), Creative Activities, *Creative Dramatics, *Disadvantaged Youth, Dramatic Play, *Dramatics, *English Instruction, Grammar, Motivation Techniques, Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Secondary Education, Self Actualization, Teacher Education, *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS West Side Story

ABSTRACT

Over a period of months, illiterate and disruptive Black and Puerto Rican junior high school students in New York City developed and staged an updated version of "West Side Story." Although by professional standards the results were poor, students were able to participate in a highly rewarding activity which demanded discipline, creativity and teamwork. By being encouraged to improvise on the original story line, illiterate children were motivated to express themselves verbally, to communicate with their audience, and to contribute their own experiences toward realizing the characters. Because this approach has many classroom possibilities, even for teaching grammar and history, units on utilizing improvisation should be included in English methods courses. Although improvisation is not a teaching panacea which will erase student's learning and behavior problems, it at least conveys the message that school can be fun. (MF)

English Record; Vol. 20, No. 1, October, 1969

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DRAMATIC IMPROVISATION AS ENGLISH TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Gil Lazier

It is a murky, stifling New York City evening in late May. Broken glass from crushed bottles and flattened pieces of aluminum and steel glitter amidst the refuse on St. Ann's Avenue as we travel through South Bronx to I.S. 38. We have been invited to attend a production of *West Side Story*, a performance presented by junior high school students who are Black, Puerto Rican, illiterate, and members of an "adjustment class" because their disruptive behavior has superceded their reading and writing inadequacies. We are curious, apprehensive, and more than a bit nervous as we measure the distance from our parking position to the door of the gym in which the show is about to begin.

The musical has been directed by one of my doctoral students at Teachers College, Columbia University, Neil Martin, a young and vigorous English and Drama teacher who has been training this group of thirteen- and fifteen-year-old kids for over twelve weeks now. He has worked late afternoons and evenings, somehow motivating his cast and crews to attend rehearsals regularly and promptly, an accomplishment in and of itself. I have come especially because many of the techniques utilized by Neil to evolve this production have been generated from a graduate course of mine in theatrical experiences and child development.

The performance is frenetic. Entrances are made with the actors tearing up and down the aisles, leaping on to the stage. Lines are bellowed; canned music blares over cracked speakers. Lights flash blindingly. The house is packed; the audience loves the production; according to most critical judgments, the presentation is awful. According to other criteria, it is amazing.

These performers have improvised every line of dialogue in the show. In essence, they have re-adapted the script to make it relevant to the street issues of today, much more pertinent than it might have been had they preserved the original mid-1950's speeches. In one sense, they have every right to do so; they live the conflicts presented within the structure of the drama. Perhaps the first time, a Puerto Rican gang is playing a Puerto

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Rican gang. But, more interestingly, they *had* to go about it this way. As functional illiterates, their reading proficiency is roughly analogous to that of the average second grader. Thus, one of the amazing aspects of this production is that it was realized at all. Another interesting facet is the specific improvisational techniques employed to evolve this presentation.

For many years—perhaps as far back as the late nineteenth century—actors have devoted developmental emphasis to what is commonly called the improvisation as a preparatory device for getting into character. Improvised drama *per se*, of course, can be traced thousands of years earlier to the *agon* of pre-Attic times. And certain periods in the development of the drama are typified by the popularity of semi-improvised theatrical forms such as the Atellan farces of the second century AD, the famous *commedia dell'arte* and the Italian repertoire of Goldoni. But within this century and this country especially, the "improv," as it is commonly called, has become hot theatrical and pedagogical property. It is used in most acting schools, has been adapted by Moreno and others and used as psychotherapy, and, of coure, has evolved into creative dramatics for young children. It is also being used more and more as a method for teaching subjects from history to all aspects of English (including grammar and punctuation).

The skeletal procedures for conducting an improvisation are simple (although there is a complex hierarchy of related, sophisticated subtleties). A premise is presented to a group of participants in the form of a story, idea, situation, or any other concept which can be molded into dramatic structure. Through free discussion, a scenario is created and divided into scenes. Characters are discussed but no formal dialogue is recorded. Parts are assigned for each scene, and the improvisation is begun. Using the locale, premise, and character information as guidelines, the participants create interactive dialogue as they progress through the scene, continuing until they decide that the scene is over. After each playing, the sequence is evaluated and suggestions for improvement are voiced. Frequently, the scene is replayed until the group wishes to proceed to the next episode.

There are many variations to this basic approach. The first episode can be replayed as many times as there are participants so that each member has an opportunity to play the sequence. Roles can be switched; new variations can be included; so that what was initially a simple and brief expository sequence could blossom into an intricate and complicated, lengthy act.

The I.S. 38 *West Side Story* offers an unusually rewarding illustration of this process. In this case, the "premise" used was

the actual script of the Berntein-Sondheim classic, which was read to the students as they attempted to follow the words in their copies of the libretto. Many of he youngsters knew of the musical, some having seen the movie and most having heard at least one or two of the songs, but their limited or nonexistent reading skill (among other factors) had prevented them from ever looking at the script prior to this time.

After the reading, the students listened to the record and discussed the show in general. Their discussions had an air of exuberance about them; for a cluster of reasons, these "problem" students were totally motivated. The talks were carefully focused by the teacher; the energy of the participants was guided so that issues most salient to evolving a production were resolved in a relatively ordered manner. All preparatory procedures introduced by the instructor were goal oriented. Care was taken to justify the hours upon hours of back-breaking repetitive rehearsal which was to come.

Over a period of weeks, the performers shaped their adaptation of *West Side Story*. Working only with the characters, music, and basic story line and almost completely disregarding all original spoken dialogue, the youngsters restructured the show. Each scene was improvised, evaluated, and improvised again until the group was satisfied with the product. At this stage, the teacher was extremely careful to focus criticism on those details most germane to improvement. Martin's training in dramatic structure, theatrical aesthetics, and experiential work on stage productions was most helpful in aiding him to realize exactly where room for specific improvement was manifest and how to go about achieving it. At that point at which the group agreed that no further major changes should be made, each participant was required to record the dialogue of the sequence on paper. Even this usually simple task was extremely difficult for the students but their motivation usually overcame their lack of writing skill. This group of functional illiterates essentially formed a team of script writers.

In like manner, the entire production emerged. As a sense of the whole became more concrete, certain scenes which seemed to fit earlier were discarded, and others were added or reshuffled to create a structure which would sustain and increase audience interest most effectively. Finally, lines were memorized and the production was staged.

Just a few values of this experience should be underscored. First, and perhaps most importantly, the children participated in a successful, highly rewarding activity which by definition de-

manded discipline, creativity, and teamwork. This achievement might not seem unusual in many socio-economic situations, but considering the life style of these youngsters, it is remarkable, especially occurring as it did within the "system." Second, the improvisational approach made literary characters come alive more vividly than might have been otherwise possible. The motivations, personalities, goals, and physical behavior patterns of figures indicated by *words on a page* were scrutinized and experienced. Third, the children were given the opportunity of contributing and relating from their own experiences, shaping the product by virtue of the everyday dilemmas of their existence. This was more than mere socio-dramatic catharsis; it was the artistic structuring of personal experiences for communication to an audience within the larger framework of a pre-existent plot. Next, and perhaps most germane to English teaching methods, this experience motivated illiterates to express themselves verbally, first in free discussion and then on paper. Skills in reading and writing—even reading and writing discerningly and sensitively—were means to a tremendously motivated end. The youngsters not only had to record their improvised dialogue, they also had to edit, polish, and refine the words in order to achieve clear and interesting communication. Then they had to memorize and deliver these words to their audience, and had practice inverbal innuendo, in taking *words on a page* which they had created themselves and delivering them in the most effective manner possible. Keep in mind that according to professional critical standards, the I.S. 38 *West Side Story* was very bad indeed, but keep also in mind that if we consider the point at which these children started and the positive experiences they (and their immediate audience) received, the show was marvelous.

I do not mean to suggest that the improvisation as a pedagogical method is a panacea for teachers of English and related subjects. There is little systematic data available on the basic effects of this experience upon the learning potential of children *per se*, let alone on the transfer of such skills to associated endeavors. A respectable number of rigorous empirical and experimental studies is in progress today and should provide necessary illumination on the actual effectiveness of this method. But even if more "scientific" support is not at hand to make a case for including the dramatic "improv" as a regular method for English instruction, I have had the opportunity to see it function, first hand, for a substantial period of time and am convinced that it is indeed a powerful teaching technique. It is unusual to discover any immediately effective method of teaching "disruptive" functional illiterates at all; if this approach can

prove positive in the setting described at the beginning of this discussion, it should be equally beneficial in more usual educational environs.

Some of the major advantages of the improvisational method in teaching English have been already suggested. Literature of all genres can be dramatized, using the text as major criteria for characterization. The child's grasp of the material can be deepened and intensified by his role playing. The insights of the literature can become raw material for playing; the words can become necessary cues for emotional responses. In creative writing ventures, the improvisation can make concepts and environments more vivid by acting out; the technical structures of original plays, short stories, even essays can be emphasized through playing.

Even some elements of grammar and syntax can be introduced through the improvisation. By associating characteristic grammatical and syntactic patterns with various kinds of personality stereotypes, the negative and positive effects of verbal expression can be emphasized. After reading and discussion of the double negative, for example, the teacher can ask each student to write two sentences, one using it and one in which this error is corrected. The next task is for the students to construct a short dramatic situation with two characters in which the double negative sentence must be inserted as a crucial element of dialogue. Further, the students must conceive characters whose speech might include such incorrect usage. Each student, with a fellow classmate as a partner, presents the improvisation and the rest of the class guesses the double negative sentence. The scene is then repeated with the error corrrected and the group analyzes the different opinions (if any) it receives from the speech of the characters. This kind of system may be used indefinitely with a wide variety of concepts as the focus.

These are just a few of the possible applications of the improvisational method in the teaching of English. There are many other, perhaps even more effective ways of using this procedure which remain to be explored. And these approaches can be created and used to great benefit as this method is included as part of the English-teaching methodology curricula. To those English educators who are in a position to shape more effective pedagogical techniques, the dramatic improvisational approach should not be neglected. Units on this procedure should be included in English methods courses, and teachers of English and English-teaching methods should gain practice and insights in the approach by taking courses in the drama as a teaching instrument.

I have most recently had a chance to chat with a few of the youngsters who participated in the I.S. 38 *West Side Story*. From what I have heard from their teachers, their behavior patterns are still very much a problem and their reading and writing progress is as yet, painfully slow. But one fact is blatantly obvious: these children had the time of their lives doing the show. Their response is not atypical; for reasons as yet still obscure, the improvisation is tremendously reinforcing for children who are given a chance to become involved with it. And it is equally obvious that this technique is flexible enough to be directly and creatively applied in the teaching of English. Even if it proves to have no other value, at the least it is fun. Heaven knows we need more enjoyment in our teaching today.